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I. — *Hippolytus and Humanism*

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I

EURIPIDES is a poet in whom many faults have been found. From the time of Aristophanes to the present day men have demonstrated that in one way or another Euripides has done his work very badly. By some indeed he has been condemned as having no good in him whatever. And yet he lives and triumphs in spite of his detractors. *Damnatur nec alget*. He is not only one of that slender company of three whose tragedies alone, out of all that were acted on the slopes of the Acropolis, antiquity has seen fit to spare to us; it would be enough of earthly fame to be a member of a triad whose other two were Aeschylus and Sophocles. But one may fairly say that Euripides himself commands even greater attention than these other two. It is easier to name three or four solid volumes of Euripidean criticism which have appeared even within the last twenty-five years than it is to find the same number of similar works on either Aeschylus or Sophocles. Men often allow the superiority of these other two; but they read Euripides, and think of him, and write of him.

Of all the eighteen or nineteen plays from Euripides' hand which we still possess none has a reputation more typical of the poet himself than the one called *Hippolytus*. Praise and

blame have been awarded to this play, both in immoderate measure. Its subject has been borrowed by two well-known poets of succeeding centuries. And though this subject was in a peculiar and unusual degree the invention of Euripides himself, there are not wanting those who claim that the *Phèdre* of Racine is a greater play than the *Hippolytus* of Euripides, though they generally admit that the *Phaedra* of Seneca is not the peer of its Greek model.

It is not my purpose to institute a comparison between the three dramas which have been produced at different times and places on this one subject. Such a comparison has been the theme of countless school-pieces in literary criticism. I desire rather to point out two features of Euripides' drama which have *not* been borrowed by his successors, and upon them as a text (a text from a heretic!) to set forth some very important characteristics of the orthodox Greek view of life.

II

Throughout the performance of the *Hippolytus* in the orchestra of the theatre of Dionysus in Athens, there stood, before the palace of Theseus, two statues, one on one side and one on the other, one of Aphrodite and one of Artemis. One was a virgin forevermore, untouched by any of the grosser inventions of mythology; the other gloried in the love which in the blameless course of nature unites man and woman. The contrast between the two divinities thus presented meets the eye even before the opening of the piece. But the poet makes the contrast manifest again in another way. The prologue of the play is spoken by Aphrodite; the epilogue, woven into the closing scene, is dominated by Artemis. Thus, doubly, in time and space, the two goddesses are at opposite poles.

Let us see what part mortals play in the drama.

Hippolytus is the son of Theseus and Hippolyta, the Amazonian queen. Hippolyta being dead, Theseus has taken to himself a second wife, Phaedra. These three, Theseus, Phaedra, and Hippolytus, are the persons essential to the

drama, and their tale is brief. Phaedra becomes enamored of her stepson Hippolytus; Hippolytus learns of her love only to reject it; Phaedra in despair commits suicide, and to forestall the accusation which she expects Hippolytus will make to Theseus, she inscribes a tablet, which is later discovered in her dead hand, with words charging Hippolytus with an attempted assault upon herself. Theseus cannot but believe these words, and Hippolytus honorably refuses to reveal the truth. Theseus thereupon prays to Poseidon, reminding him of his promise to grant him three wishes, and begs him to destroy Hippolytus. Poseidon complies and Hippolytus is slain. But before he dies, Theseus learns the truth, and the love between father and son is fully restored.

This is the tale of unnatural love, of foul falsehood, of hasty vengeance, and of apparently unmerited suffering, which is unfolded before the eyes of the audience. But now note the transformation of this tale from the sordid to the sublime. Euripides represents the fortunes of his human characters as dominated and controlled by the divinities whose share in the action of the play has already been described. Hippolytus is a devotee of Artemis; he flouts Aphrodite and is unmoved by the natural instinct of man's love for woman. Aphrodite resents the slight which his whole life puts upon her, and herself sets in motion the train of events which leads to Hippolytus' unhappy end. She herself inspires in Phaedra the love for Hippolytus which Phaedra cannot resist. Phaedra, with a moral sense more pure than that of Aphrodite herself, struggles against her love, and, above all, struggles against its revelation. It is only through the action of an old nurse who is endowed with a far duller sense of right and wrong, that Hippolytus comes to know of Phaedra's passion. The miracle is accomplished: Phaedra's passion stirs no repugnance in the mind of the reader. He can even forgive the lying accusation which she leaves for her husband to see. She accuses Hippolytus in order to save her good name for her *children*, a motive which with the Greeks would have required no defence. She does

not imagine for a moment that the accusation will lead to Hippolytus' death; *that* part of the tragic tale is caused by the hasty anger of Theseus. The immediate causes for Hippolytus' fate are to be found in the acts of men and women; but the primal impulse that set them all in motion came from Aphrodite. Taking offence at Hippolytus' neglect of herself, she sought her revenge and consummated it through human agents.

What are we to think of all this? The bare plot we found vulgar enough; but has Euripides really improved matters by transferring the blame from earth to heaven? Have we only a picture of righteous humanity wantonly tormented by petulant divinities? Indeed it is something like this; but if this were all, it would truly be intolerable. We do not comprehend the drama until we realize that Hippolytus died for his *sin*; he had sinned against Aphrodite and therefore he must suffer. The punishment may at first seem too great for the sin; indeed the sin itself may not clearly be discerned. But unless we see it, the play remains for us bad and unforgivable.

There are two features in this play, I have said, which distinguish it from the plays of Seneca and Racine; and whatever may be our judgment of the Roman and the Frenchman, it is these two features which ennoble the drama of Euripides. They are these: the visible and palpable presence of Aphrodite and Artemis, and the fact that the play is named, and justly named, not the *Phaedra*, but the *Hippolytus*. *Without* the gods, the plot becomes one of human intrigue, and Phaedra becomes the centre of interest; and as the central figure, she is not the object of our pity and commiseration, but of our disdain. *With* the gods, Hippolytus becomes a truly tragic figure, and Phaedra is merely a tool of heaven. Phaedra is sacrificed in order to punish Hippolytus. But with consummate skill Euripides contrives by this very death to win and hold our sympathy for a woman who does the unforgivable thing, who shows her love unasked. The interest does not decline, as many critics assert, after the death of Phaedra; with splendid unity of purpose

the play centres about Hippolytus, and the *Greek* spectator at least would know that the piece was only half-finished at the death of Phaedra. It is true that the poet has done his work so well in creating the character of Phaedra (indeed he seems almost to have accomplished the impossible), that we feel some regret at her departure from the scene. But shall we charge the piece with lack of unity because the first part of it pleases us so much that we are loath to move on to the second? Racine not only makes Phaedra his central figure and calls his piece *Phèdre*, but actually makes Hippolytus the lover of another woman, Aricie. His play is really a masterly pathological study of a woman who is maddened and diseased by ungovernable passion, a play different at all points from Euripides' except in the mere external features of the plot.

It should now be apparent that the excellence of Euripides' play is due to the fact that it presents dramatically the sin and punishment of the youth whose name it bears. If Hippolytus has not sinned; if his suffering is due to the irresponsible caprice of divinities; if Phaedra is merely a lovesick and susceptible woman who ruins the man she loves because she cannot have him for herself; if all is purposeless and vain in the series of events which make up the action of the play, — then we are left with some pages of lovely lyrics and graceful verse, but we have no tolerable drama. The one thing which makes a drama of this series of events is the sin of Hippolytus. This sin is not immediately recognizable to the modern reader. But it seems fair to suppose that it would be instantly understood by the Athenian audience for whom the play was written; and if the poet could assume the quick comprehension of his audience in this matter, *we* may assume that the sin in question was one that was frowned upon instinctively by the Greek moral sense. If we can define and appreciate this sin, we shall at one and the same time justify to ourselves a work of art which baffles us a little while it charms, and come to a better understanding of the normal Greek laws of conduct.

III

It is not easy for one people to comprehend the laws of conduct which are observed by another people. The moral sense is created and moulded by so many tiny impulses of tradition, circumstance, and environment that it can hardly be the same even in two individuals who occupy adjoining dwellings. Between different nations the gap is infinitely wider. What, then, shall we say of the profound gulf lying between the Athenians of the fifth century before Christ and our own contemporaries of the twentieth century after Christ? Is it possible for us to enter into the consciousness of that remote period, which lies so far in the past that it would be quite lost in the darkness, if it were not illuminated by the radiance of its philosophy and its art? Can we eradicate from our minds all that we have learned since that distant time, the doctrines of the later schools, the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Neo-Platonists; the profound philosophy of later date with which the world has grown old; the revolutionary teachings of Christianity, love, self-sacrifice, humility, and paradoxes innumerable; and, last of all, the cold and merciless discoveries of men who investigate the phenomena of the natural world? To tear these conceptions from our minds is almost to rid ourselves of the power of thought. Of these is the very substance of our intellect. Clearly, one may not without patient and trance-like reflection recover the conceptions and beliefs of a remote past.

Let us see if the case of Hippolytus will enable us to comprehend better the view of life which was held by Euripides and his fellow-Athenians? What was the sin of Hippolytus?

As Euripides presents the matter, the sin of Hippolytus is a haughty and contemptuous attitude towards Aphrodite. So much is clear. But Hippolytus is guilty of a deeper and more universal sin than if he had merely broken the arbitrary prescriptions of a jealous god. *That* would be a provincial matter, of no consequence to us. But the truth is that Aphrodite stands for an important and necessary element in human life, the element of sexual love, without which human

life is impossible; and Hippolytus' hostility was directed not against the wilful commands of an irresponsible divinity, but against a law which changeth not though the heavens fall.

Hippolytus sinned because he chose to live in defiance of the laws of the universe. He denied the value and importance of a certain element in the life of the world as the world is constituted. He failed to see that a man may not with impunity distort the cosmic adjustment of things. He gloried in the denial of a physical impulse which is planted in the nature of all living creatures, and which must be followed and not thwarted. If he had refused to eat, he would have died, because it is a law of nature that man shall eat; if he had refused to drink, he would have died. These laws he did not break. But he did refuse to obey the impulse of sexual love, which is no less unmistakably a human quality than the craving for food and drink. He broke a law which is like the law of gravity. His will came into collision with the unyielding, rigid, and impermeable order of things. He was therefore shattered. The beauty of his life and person, the wholesomeness of his pursuits, the delicacy and refinement of his nature could not save him. There was much that was noble in his nature, but he failed of true wisdom. He was unskilled in the art of life, which the Greeks called *Sophia*.

The Greeks had no word of *moral* reprobation for him. They would not have understood us if we had proposed to call him "bad" or "wicked." He made a mistake, he was unwise, he failed to see things as they are and act accordingly; therefore he perished. He broke the law which is imposed upon humanity by powers mightier than itself; and *that* is sin. What matters it who made the laws? Heaven, the gods, providence, necessity, the eternal flux? This does not affect the question. Man must obey the laws whoever made them.

In judging the conduct of Hippolytus there is always danger that the notion of asceticism may intrude itself into our meditations. Nothing could be more disastrous to a proper perception of Greek thought than to suppose that Hippoly-

tus was in the slightest degree an ascetic. We mean by an ascetic, I suppose, a man who mortifies the flesh in order to attain great spiritual blessings. Now Hippolytus did not satisfy either term of the definition. He denied himself no pleasure *which he desired*, and he was striving for no spiritual perfection, nor indeed any form of happiness other than that which he actually did enjoy. He claimed no virtue because of his chastity; he was too good a Greek for that. He simply preferred that state of life and would not recognize the value and importance of the normal relation of the sexes. If he had renounced certain natural human joys and emotions in order to obtain thereby a deeper spiritual life and some sort of communion with the unknowable, we, with our wider knowledge of the varieties of religious experience, should be disposed in charity to call him a saint and his death a martyrdom. But I think I may assume that the reader will perceive that in the opinion of Hippolytus and of all other Greeks there was no positive merit to be gained through the atrophy of certain natural functions. What I call upon the reader to believe is something which requires an even greater stretch of the critical imagination. Hippolytus' action was not only not meritorious, it was actually wrong, because it was inhuman. Nor should the modern reader think that because Hippolytus is blamed for his inhuman continence he would have acquitted himself any better if he had indulged in sensual excess. The Greeks knew, better than any others, that indulgence, even if it exceeds bounds by only a little, leads inevitably to ruin. It is a narrow path which man is called upon to tread, and a pit of destruction yawns on either hand. One rock of offence had caused Hippolytus to stumble and precipitated him into the abyss; other men perish for other offences. But there was a rule of human conduct, clearly recognized by the Greeks, by which Hippolytus and all others may guide their lives. Let us pass, therefore, from the peculiar and unusual offence of Hippolytus to a consideration of that general law which was so familiar to Euripides' audience, that he could trust them to understand the sin of Hippolytus even though they had no decalogue and had in

all probability never before met with an aberration similar to his.

If Hippolytus' sin was the transgression of the law, what, then, was the law? First of all it must be clearly understood that the law which he had transgressed was not thought of as an article in a moral code which embraced a large number of particular and heterogeneous commandments. The law which he transgressed was a general one which contained implicitly all the rules which should govern human conduct in particular cases. Whatever may be the sin, it is always the same law that is broken. Whether a man in the pride of power commits overweening acts, or shows himself irreverent towards the gods, or indulges to excess in food or drink, or lives in idleness and takes no thought for the morrow, one law embraces all his mistakes. And this was the law: A man shall recognize and observe the requirements and restrictions which are imposed upon the freedom of humanity and he shall not seek to overstep these restrictions or to shirk these requirements. Knowledge of these requirements and restrictions was entirely empirical; a man knew where danger lay because his fellow-men had met that danger in the past and perished. Indeed it was part of the law that men must know where danger lay. They saw that in the interest of safety and happiness they must, first, discover what things man *may* do and what things man *must* do in the circumstances in which humanity is placed, and, second, *do* the things which must be done and leave undone the things which must not be done. It is quite simple; it is as clear as day. There are no shadows of mysticism, or asceticism, or undefined yearnings for a spiritual perfection which transcends the perfection of real life in a real world. The ideal was the perfection of real man in a real world, and the standard of perfection was found in man himself.

Here we have a real ethical system whose laws of conduct were not revealed upon a Sinai or published in a Koran, but based, as I said, upon a standard of perfection which is found in and by man himself. This ethical system seems to me to be sufficiently definite to deserve a name, and for convenience

I propose to call it humanism. In this I am not doing violence to the historical use of this word, in which it defines the attitude of certain men of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who felt themselves strengthened by the reading of Greek books to rebel against the ecclesiastical trammels which had long fettered human life and thought. Indeed, if we recognize this ethical humanism among the Greeks themselves, we shall understand better the enlightenment which it brought to the men of the Renaissance, who, as disciples of the Greeks, have come to be called humanists themselves. In the fifteenth century again, as in the fifth century before Christ, we find the same impatience of authority, the same eagerness to question all laws which seem to be founded not upon the real nature of men, but upon the hereditary prescriptions of religion. But the Greeks had never wandered far from their reasonable humanism in conduct; and though the fifth century did much to undo the ancient belief in the gods, humanism remained practically unaffected. The gods of Greece had never really encroached upon the domain of human conduct save in a few particulars.

There is really no essential bond between Greek humanism and religion. Humanism led men to examine their own human powers and human limitations; but it did not require them to believe that these powers and limitations were administered by superhuman personalities called gods. The system was not essentially either theistic or atheistic. It disregarded the whole matter. In point of fact, it was commonly believed that humanity was ruled by a heavenful of gods and that a certain measure of intercourse might be kept up with these beings. But there would have been no real difference, so far as the rule of life is concerned, between the man who believed in the gods and gave them their due in worship and the man who, in the spirit of the modern scientist, saw the universe moved and controlled by blind and senseless laws of cause and effect. Indeed Euripides himself is a curious example of a blending of the two ways of thinking. Traditional gods, Artemis and Aphrodite, are at once characters in his play and the executors of the universal law. They are

presented in human form and there is a slight semblance of humanity about their being; but it must be confessed that they are hardly more than the imperfect personification of certain facts of nature with which the real men and women of the piece must reckon. The men and women are far more admirable creatures than the divinities who warp their lives.

There is, then, I say, no essential reason why the humanist should be either theist or atheist. But the trend of thought in the fifth century seems to show that there is a tendency in humanism to deny, or at least to neglect, the gods. As philosophers searched more and more deeply into the nature of man's environment, they more and more lost sight of the gods, or at any rate suffered them to be transfused into mere allegorical representations of cosmic forces. In the fourth century frankly allegorical figures like Fate or Chance came to be thought of as the rulers of the world. Humanism, prone as it is to concentrate its attention upon the limitations rather than the latent powers of humanity, is likely to offer less incentive to high endeavor than those habits of thought which, recognizing kinship between human nature and the nature of divinity, set no bounds to the powers of humanity, but rather through the agency of vague and mysterious aspirations call men on to noble and heroic enterprise.

This, then, was the course of Greek thought. First humanism with religion; next humanism with sceptical rationalism; and last of all humanism, still abiding, with the great systems of thought which were the work of the philosophical imagination in the last centuries of classical Greece.

Euripides was profoundly moved by new currents of thought which were characteristic of the period in which he lived. He was radical, he was a rationalist, he was a sceptic. But his radicalism and the radicalism of his contemporaries did not touch the abiding orthodox humanism which is inseparable from the Greek mind. There was nothing new in his conception of the sin of Hippolytus. It was the nature of the superhuman power which limits and defines the freedom of humanity, which in Euripides as in other writers of the fifth century is conceived in a new guise. Euripides still

writes of Aphrodite and Artemis, personalities who in the old-fashioned belief had shared with other similar personalities supreme and universal dominion; but in Euripides these august names are a thin disguise for cold and impersonal natural laws which circumscribed men's activities, exactly as the gods of heaven had circumscribed them in the old belief. However, this novelty does not affect the orthodox nature of the humanism which the play exhibits. It makes very little difference to a man whether he is destroyed by a personal divinity or by an impersonal force: he knows that in one form or another, inevitable destruction awaits him if he breaks the obvious law. All the world, all the *Greek* world, could see that Hippolytus chose to live in open defiance of an obvious law; Euripides set before the world in a play the short, quick manner of his taking-off, and in so doing gave expression to the instinctive feeling of his race.